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ABSTRACT

This publication describes four highly regarded workforce development programs, concentrating on how they cultivate emotional intelligence--how they prepare trainees for the cultural demands of the workplace. Section 1 describes how ACHIEVE, Cabrillo Community College, Watsonville, California (CA) teaches business dress, skills and culture in two languages using reflection and office simulation. Section 2 describes Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, Brooklyn, New York. It looks at these features: attention to minor rules; required student participation in constant discussion; World of Work course focusing on public speaking and how people present themselves in business and life; and understanding by grilling. Section 3 describes YMCA of Greater Boston/Training, Inc., Massachusetts, which uses the "Lester Hill" job simulation, an 18-week training program. It looks at these elements: seeing the world through a boss's eyes; a corporate atmosphere with a heart; and teaching human relations. Section 4 describes Op-Net, San Francisco, CA, that trains Web designers in five weeks (plus a two-month internship). It sets out how the program reflects the more refined technical skills and subtler social skills demanded by the industry and provides extensive placement and ongoing support services. Section 5 discusses seven real-world lessons that can be adapted to teach any population soft (social) skills with any mix of hard (technical) skills training. (YLB)

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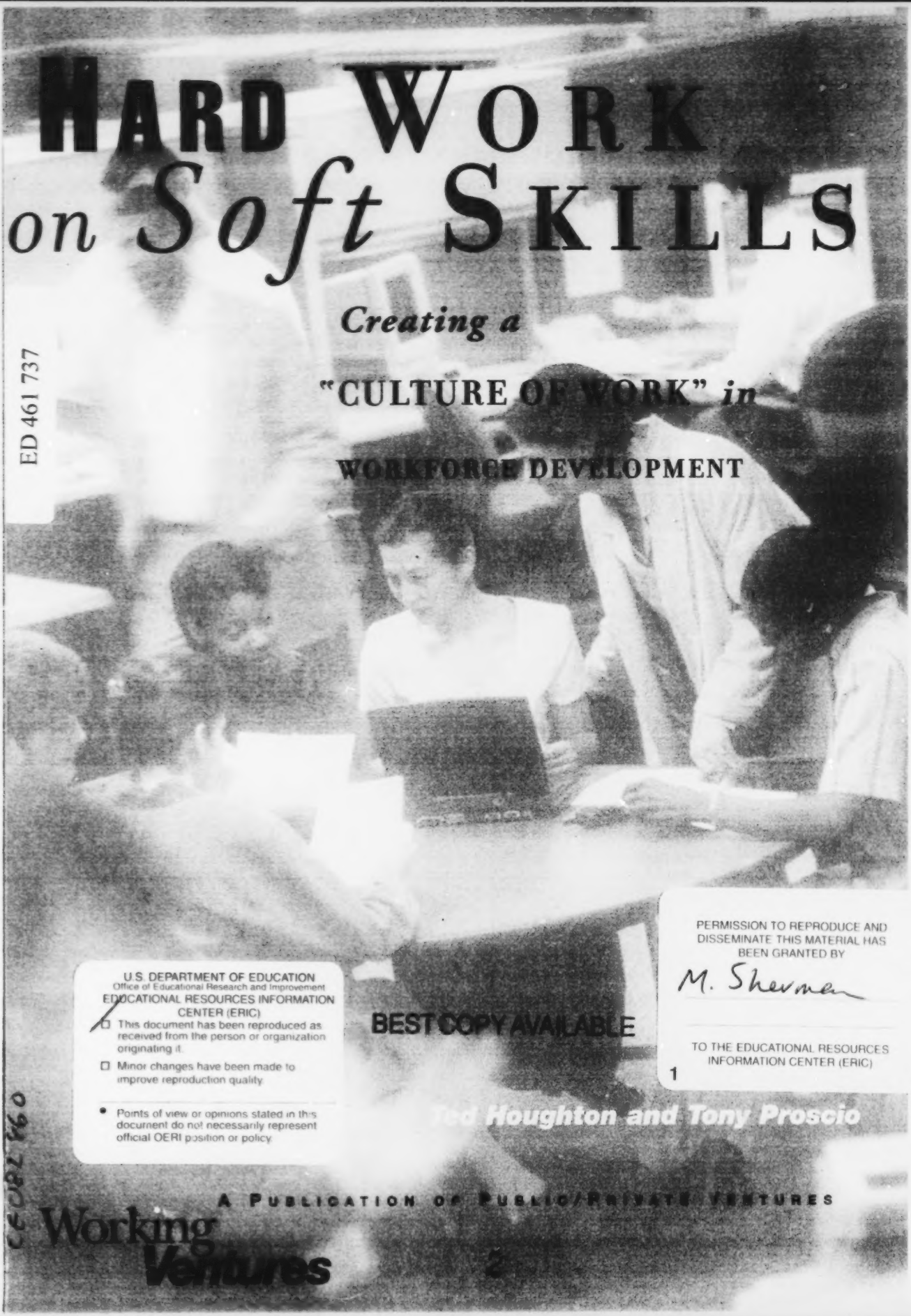

HARD WORK on *Soft* SKILLS

Creating a "CULTURE OF WORK" *in* WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

ED 461 737

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Creating a

"CULTURE OF WORK" *in*

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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P/PV

Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Working Ventures seeks to improve the performance of the workforce development field by providing practitioners and policymakers with the knowledge and tools needed to operate effective employment programs. We support the field by documenting effective employment strategies and practices, convening practitioner workshops and providing resources to encourage program innovation.

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Lastly, the authors wish to thank the four directors of the programs for their hospitality and patience, their valuable insights on job training and education, and finally, for reviewing drafts of the final report. Willard Pinn of Training, Inc., Joe Hawkins of Op-Net, Sister Mary Franciscus of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, and Maia Chisholm of ACHIEVE, who all took considerable time out of their busy days to comment on and strengthen this report, without losing a step in their more important work of helping people improve their lives.

When she concentrates, Susan K. can type at least 40 words a minute. She would probably be faster without the three-inch fingernails. Her spelling is decent, and she can format a document in the major word-processing programs with basic commands like centered headings, indented text and boldface type. She knows the rudiments of Excel and Lotus 1-2-3: she can enter and sum a column of numbers, move the column elsewhere, and multiply the rows by those in another column. Susan K. is smart and more competent than many first-time clerical workers.

The longest she has held a job is three weeks.

Few workforce development practitioners are fond of the phrase "soft skills." It is vague, it is mildly dismissive, a bit of a cliché. But then they meet someone like Susan K. and try to describe why, with all her unquestionable "hard" skills, she is so frustrating to work with and employ. Suddenly the phrase and the distinction it embodies become almost inescapable.

Susan K. slouches in her chair, chews gum loudly, swears like a trucker at rush hour. She genuinely likes people and is known to go out of her way to be kind to neighbors, but she comes on so harshly that most people are frightened of her. She dislikes criticism and responds either with unprintable putdowns or icy sullenness. She has learned most of her office skills on her own ("when the teacher just leaves me alone so I can do my work").

It is no surprise to learn that Susan's background is grim. The details are heartbreaking. But for a workforce development program, especially in the high-pressure policy environment of "Work First," Susan is first and foremost a "soft-skills" challenge. Many employers are begging for her talents. But at this stage, no one can use them.

"We *hire* the smile," says a spokesman for the hospitality industry. "We can *train* the skills." Increasingly, in an economy dominated by communication and teamwork—whether electronic or face to face—the "smile" that employers say they want is really just shorthand for a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, and personal habits that many older working people take for granted and most find hard to list. Any such list would include a good deal more than a smile—although the more cheerful virtues, such as friendliness and optimism, would surely rank high.

With those would come a list something like this one:

Work ethic—a motivating belief that employees owe their employer a full day of diligent work, including following supervisors' instructions.

Courtesy—the habitual use of "please," "thank you," "excuse me" and "may I help you" in dealing with customers, supervisors and colleagues.

Teamwork—the ability to share responsibilities, confer with others, honor commitments, help others do their jobs and seek help when needed.

Self-discipline and self-confidence—the ability to arrange one's own tasks for best performance, to learn from experience, to ask questions and correct mistakes, and to absorb criticism and direction without feeling defeated, resentful or insulted.

Conformity to prevailing norms—the ability to govern one's dress, grooming, body language, tone of voice and vocabulary according to the particular style of a given workplace.

Language proficiency—the ability to speak, read and write standard English in a businesslike way. (Whether this is a "hard" or "soft" skill depends on the person. One may have the "hard" skill of knowing what usage is correct and what is substandard but lack the "soft" skill of knowing when to use only standard forms and in what tone to use them.)

Admittedly, these qualities are of only modest use without the technical aptitudes essential to nearly all jobs. Employers, increasingly desperate for mature, socially well-adjusted workers, sometimes underestimate the difficulty of teaching the basic skills they expect from every employee. And sadly, even if people have a full 12 years of formal education, more and more who are enrolling in workforce programs lack both the social and the technical skills they will need in the workplace. In that respect, Susan K., for all her problems, is far above the norm.

Even so, in many employers' eyes, the social skills are a *sine qua non.* In Northern California's Santa Cruz County, within the commuting orbit of Silicon Valley, Rock Pfotenhauer, a community college dean, reports that business executives in the region are worried that a lack of skills, particularly the "soft" ones, is jeopardizing the region's economic growth. "There [is] a tremendous need for well-qualified office workers, and more than any other issue, the lack of them could hinder the area's economic competitiveness." Yet, he says, "The CEOs tell us, 'Don't worry so much about the technical skills...We need you to teach them how to show up on time, how to work in teams, how to take supervision.'"

This is difficult terrain. The qualities that a daintier age once called "deportment," "poise" or "citizenship" came to be regarded by the late twentieth century as code for a set of arbitrary northern European cultural preferences—the sorts

of things vilified in the 1960s and 1970s as "cultural imperialism." Many who came of age in those years—including a great many leaders of workforce development programs—still cringe (at least inwardly) at the idea of a middle-aged white person telling young black or Latino adults how to dress, choose their vocabulary, sit in a chair or respond to criticism. Yet that is precisely the job many of them now face.

Worse, even if one manages to sidestep the sensitivities of race and class, there remain other, more practical quandaries to contend with: Today's rules of "deportment" are no longer clear even in the social mainstream. Upscale clothing stores now provide "consultants" for executives baffled by the rules of casual Fridays. Show up for an interview at a typical dot-com in a classic three-button suit and you might just kiss the job good-bye. A gifted trainee from a New York workforce program found he needed a whole new wardrobe when he stepped into his first job at one of the city's "Silicon Alley" startups. After excelling in a training program that demanded white shirts and ties, he suddenly found himself the lone "geek" in a room full of denim and T-shirts.

Nonetheless, workforce practitioners are finding more and more that the uncertainties of the soft-skills world are inescapable and that success at all levels of training depends on being able to teach social disciplines like courtesy, teamwork and self-control—what Rutgers University psychologist Daniel Goleman calls "emotional intelligence."

The following pages describe four highly regarded workforce development programs, concentrating on how they cultivate "emotional intelligence"—how they prepare trainees for the cultural demands of the workplace. All of these programs approach the task in many ways, mixing and matching their tactics to the needs of particular groups of trainees. Still, each of them has developed a degree of expertise or a distinctive style in one technique that stands out from all the others. We have therefore drawn attention to these areas of special strength or insight, while still trying to capsulize their general approach to soft skills.

All four organizations are also distinguished at least as much for their effectiveness in teaching hard skills: Each has built a reputation among loyal employers for producing technically able graduates. But for this discussion, the focus will be on the even harder work of teaching the intangible and largely unquantifiable skills of demeanor, professionalism and self discipline—in short, training the "smile."

LEARNING TO *reflect*

ACHIEVE

Cabrillo Community College, *Watsonville, California*

At the beginning of a discussion on office attire, Maia Chisholm, director and lead instructor of the office-skills training program ACHIEVE, suddenly walked to the back of her classroom. Telling the students not to turn around, she asked, "What am I wearing?" Some knew; most had not noticed.

Her clothes were from her usual, fairly conservative wardrobe, no more remarkable that day than on any other. She proceeded to lead a brief discussion about business dress: what is usually considered acceptable, what is inappropriate, and why memorable clothes are not always a good thing.

ACHIEVE has taken many approaches to this subject. Chisholm sometimes shows videos to draw attention to the subtleties of business dress (one recently was a clip from the film *Erin Brockovich*, with Julia Roberts as the coarse, halter-sporting secretary). She uses posters or fashion-magazine cutouts to show types of dress appropriate for different situations. As the year goes on, she will sometimes chide students about an ill-chosen dress or pair of shoes. But this time, early in the program, Chisholm had something different in mind.

A day or two after the initial discussion, she says, "I put on mismatched socks, a hat to cover my bad hair day, my slip was showing, I didn't wear lipstick. I even wore this low-cut blouse." She laughs, "It's embarrassing for me to even think about it. I had to get dressed at the program, I was so afraid of being seen by my colleagues." Then, at the morning briefing that starts off each day at ACHIEVE, Chisholm again walked to the back of the class. As before, she asked the students not to turn around. "What am I wearing?"

They could describe the whole outfit from hat to socks.

"It was a good way to get the students to be aware of how clothing makes us appear to others," Chisholm explained. "It provides

them with a context to judge what an appropriate outfit is. On me, it was clear that these clothes were inappropriate." The demonstration also provided a good laugh, which made it memorable. And there was a subtle but important bonus to the stunt: Chisholm's willingness to poke fun at herself made self-criticism easier for the rest of the class.

In the end, they proceeded to the basement, where Rachel Mayo, the director of Cabrillo's Watsonville campus, has collected a store of used clothing for the students. Although the clothes may not always be the right size or the latest style, and some students do not like taking what seems like charity from the program, the earlier discussion at least put some people more at ease about considering the resource. The lesson after all had been meant to lift some of the emotional freight from the task of picking a wardrobe: Work clothes are something you use to make a living. Whether you buy them, borrow them or take them from Cabrillo's basement, they are a tool, not an identity. The trick is simply to make sure you are using the right tool.

Clothing is an essential part of any soft-skills curriculum. But at ACHIEVE, this exercise was also a necessary preparation for one unusual aspect of the program: After their first five weeks at ACHIEVE, the students set their own dress code. They use examples that have been presented to them—posters, videos, the teacher's wardrobe—as well as their own clothes and dressing styles to define categories like business attire and casual or professional dress. They make columns of attributes and talk over the pros and cons of each. In the end, they decide how many days a week should be required for each type of dress.

Although Chisholm is not really keen on five days of mandatory professional dress, she typically argues for that. Some students usually counter by advocating full-time casual. Eventually others suggest compromises. In one recent semester, the final vote was for two days of professional attire, two casual days, and one day when students can choose either one. In this way, the students have gone through the entire thought process behind a dress code and come to many of the same conclusions that their future employers might.

It is a theme that arises frequently at ACHIEVE, as at many programs that excel in teaching the culture of work: Students learn to see the world through an employer's eyes. By learning to manage, they also learn to be managed.

Best of all, when they violate the code, they are no longer taking a swipe at authority—they are just breaking their own rules.

Skills and Culture, in Two Languages

Cabrillo Community College has two campuses: one in the fashionable redwood area of northern Santa Cruz County; the other in the blue-collar south, an area of agriculture and cannery towns like Gilroy, the garlic capital of the world, Castroville (artichokes), and Cabrillo's southern base, Watsonville, where nearly all non-Chilean strawberries are grown. The student body at the South County campus reflects the local demographics: 70 percent of Watsonville is Latino, as is just about everyone who attends Cabrillo's local campus. Because public transportation is limited, almost all of the students who attend are from the immediate town.

The eight-year-old ACHIEVE program, based at the southern campus, is actually just one course among hundreds at Cabrillo Community College. Unlike most others, it is designed to end not in a degree but in a job. And it is far more demanding than a typical class—for example, students have to attend the course 20 hours a week (plus another six hours a week in Cabrillo English classes). But because it is part of a larger institution, it can and does make extensive use of the other resources of the community college, including many services like personal counseling that other workforce development programs would have to create on their own.

A prime example of these institutional services is the college's "Fast Track to Work" program, a central place in which to apply for welfare or unemployment benefits, special work-study positions, or financial aid or to get academic or personal advice, health services, child-care referrals, job-search assistance, or anything else they might need in order to get to work quickly. Fast Track and the programs and services under its umbrella allow ACHIEVE to concentrate on skills training, both hard and soft, with just a three-person staff. Without these support services, ACHIEVE would be much less likely to maintain its record of accomplishment.

In its first year, ACHIEVE graduated 21 of its 22 students. Over eight years, 147 of its 160 students have completed the course. Students often reach ACHIEVE through the Human Resources Administration (the county welfare department), although that pipeline has diminished in the last few years since welfare reform took full effect. The slack has been picked up by referrals from other agencies serving unemployed and displaced workers, and many students are referred by friends, graduates or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instructors.

"Our students are new immigrants," says Rachel Mayo, the director of South Campus, "or they're displaced workers from the canneries that have closed in the area, or they're the sons and daughters of cannery workers or farm laborers. In these cultures, there's a real persecution complex, and rightfully so—they *have* been persecuted, and still are. But if you come from this background, it's easy to adopt a feeling of victimization in all situations;

and if you have that victim mentality, you tend to interpret events negatively. The boss may ask you to redo a task, and you'll think, 'Oh, he must hate me.' It's easy to see everything in terms of discrimination. We try to show that when something bad happens you try to fix the problem, that you don't automatically view the issue in terms of defeat."

Bad things do happen, even in the best of circumstances. Even when graduates are prepared, as they must be, to work in the English-speaking North American culture of a typical California office, they must also know how to handle being different in a world in which some will expect them not to measure up and where even compliments can be double-edged. One successful ACHIEVE graduate reported that "even though my boss was very positive, he still was surprised at how I worked. He said I was the only Mexican he'd ever met who was efficient and worked hard."

Teaching students to function in an English-speaking workplace is partly a matter of being alert to a different culture and adapting to it. ("I learned that it wasn't appropriate to speak Spanish with other office workers of Mexican descent," said one recent graduate, "even though it felt more natural.") But part of it is mastering the language itself, both written and spoken. This area is another in which ACHIEVE gets substantial help from the community college.

Rather than teaching English within the ACHIEVE program or having to depend on outside programs with possible time conflicts or different expectations, ACHIEVE students can rely on the college's English and ESL programs to provide a complementary course of learning. ACHIEVE requires every student to attend some type of English class at the college on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, for four hours a week. That study is complemented by a half hour a day in ACHIEVE's own Business English program.

All of these efforts are essential for ACHIEVE's students, many of whom are struggling to learn the professional use of a language whose rudiments may still be new to them. To make matters more difficult, some students are not fully literate in Spanish either. Says Judy Kittleson, the ACHIEVE instructor in computers and business language, "Some of our students are fluent and literate in both languages, and some are literate in Spanish but are new to English. But many are cannery workers or longtime residents of the area who speak both languages fluently but are not literate in either. ESL classes will serve the second group well, but this last group needs just as much help, and it's not as easy to teach them."

At ACHIEVE, English is thus both a hard and a soft skill: Learning to read the language and speak it correctly is a matter of conventional teaching, rote learning and practice. Mastering its subtler rules of formality, courtesy and tone is hard

enough for native speakers; for newcomers, it is a double challenge—a "soft" skill with hard edges.

Learning to Reflect, and Reflect, and Reflect

Maia Chisholm's training philosophy is organized around what she calls the "Four Rs of Structured Occupational Immersion": responsibility, reflection, repetition and resource management. Of these four, the one most closely aligned to conventional hard-skills training is obviously "repetition"—a nearly relentless drilling in typing, language, proofreading, filing, procedures and the habitual tasks of office work. When students learn a computer skill, for example, they do not just take notes on it. They copy verbatim the relevant passages of the user manual into their notes. They then retype the whole thing—manual text plus their own notes and comments—into a "How-Do-I?" manual of their own. Each iteration of writing, rephrasing, copying and typing drills the instructions more deeply.

Yet ACHIEVE's discussions of social and cultural skills often follow a path of repetition as well. Soft-skill topics like dress, demeanor, punctuality and thoroughness deliberately arise over and over again throughout the course, in different contexts but often in the same, repeated terms. All of this is critical to the program, but it is also the feature of ACHIEVE that is most typical of successful workforce development programs elsewhere.

The other three principles are more unusual, and they apply at least as much to soft skills as to hard, often more. "Responsibility," for example, is more an attitude than a technique, a habit of mind and personality that requires experience to instill and perfect. "Resource management"—which to Chisholm encompasses managing time, setting task priorities and balancing limited personal budgets, among other things—is likewise a compass by which to gauge all sorts of challenges, whether interpersonal, spiritual or material. Both these tenets of the program—along with "reflection," which we will discuss in a moment—are woven into every facet of the curriculum, soft and hard, usually in ways that students scarcely notice. Often all four principles are in play at once.

For example, in a recent class, Chisholm asked students how far they had progressed in their self-directed keyboarding lessons. Only three students said they expected to finish that part of the course on time. She responded with concern—the class was supposed to start mastering a word-processing program by the end of that week—but she was sympathetic as well. She explained that in the business world "we're always adjusting timelines, and deciding which are fixed and which are flexible…So here's your problem: I want everyone to finish all the typing lessons by next Friday. So let's take a 10-minute break, and you work out among yourselves how long you think it will take *all* of you to finish; then we'll come back and negotiate."

When they reconvened, Chisholm pointed out that their current situation illustrated a common problem they would often face in the future: "What are you going to say when your boss asks, 'Why isn't this done?' You don't say, 'I'm so-o-o sorry, I'll do it right now!' You might not have time. And you don't say, 'I just didn't do it. So what?'" (The class laughs). "No, you tell him, 'I'm sorry, but I had too many tasks to do. How would you like us to handle it?' That way, you haven't tried to duck the problem, but both of you are going to have to solve it together. So now, how should we solve *our* problem?"

The class made it clear that they would be able to finish by Friday, if only they did not have to complete other practice exercises scheduled for the same week. Chisholm accepted the bargain: "Based on *your* recommendations, next week I won't give any additional assignments. And in return, you'll be finished by next Friday. So there, we've reached a compromise. But I'm going to hold you to it, OK?" The students agreed, and the class moved on, having just practiced a combination of responsibility and resource management, all in the interest of completing a repetitive learning exercise. And, they just practiced negotiating with the boss.

But the pacing of this exchange also subtly illustrates the program's most distinctive and pervasive principle: reflection. Just before the class stepped out for its impromptu time-management caucus, Chisholm deliberately broadened the discussion into a reflection on the general dynamics of a work environment. When they walked back into the room, she did the same again: This experience, she told them in effect, is just one instance of a universal set of problems, and it's possible to think through those problems with a few guiding principles that we all can learn, master, internalize and repeat.

Before the students went off to discuss how they could finish their keyboard training on time, Chisholm had drawn their attention to the virtue of flexibility: the fact that schedules can be adjusted, but only in the interest of getting things done, not in the interest of shirking responsibility. When they returned, she shifted the reflection to interpersonal skills: how subordinates can raise problems respectfully and enlist the boss's help in solving those problems without falling into an extreme of being either servile or insolent. Both reflections were far broader than the matter at hand: how to learn some skills by the end of the week. But both provided a framework in which to think of the *next* such problem and solve it just as responsibly.

In ACHIEVE's world, reflection is the consummate soft skill. Says Chisholm, "Reflection means taking time on a daily and weekly basis to develop an awareness about *how you fit in* at home, with your friends, and most important, in an office. We're not trying to change students' identities, we're trying to give them a new context in which to view those identities. If the students know who they are and where they're going, they'll be able to accomplish a lot."

Everything taught at ACHIEVE is explained in a broader context or, better yet, left to the students to figure out or decide for themselves on the basis of guiding principles that echo throughout the program. It is a very self-conscious learning process, starting with the program handbook: There is not one. Students gradually compile their own handbooks and "How-Do-I?" manuals, updating them daily, weekly and monthly throughout the course. The college's standard course description for ACHIEVE outlines "expectations" rather than requirements and presents program "protocols" rather than rules.

Even the behavioral rules that ACHIEVE shares with most other employment programs are couched in explanatory, or even positive, terms: "No food or drink allowed" is prefaced with the information that "The ACHIEVE suite is carpeted." The rule against gum is stated thus: "GUM may be chewed anywhere, any time, EXCEPT at ACHIEVE at the Watsonville campus." The most important rule is highlighted: "Learn to ask if you are unsure." Instead of a handbook, many of the rules and procedures are decided through facilitated discussion among the students, like the dress code issue.

Instead of a strict week-by-week schedule, the ACHIEVE program uses "instructor checklists" that provide a rough guide for teachers as to what knowledge and skills need to be imparted. The pace is determined by the instructor's minute-by-minute assessment of whether the students are "getting it" and by periodic check-ins and discussion with the students (as in the example with the unfinished keyboarding skills). Students even get some say in what level of achievement should be required. Chisholm explains, "After a few days in an activity, I'll ask the class, 'In order to get an A in keyboarding, for example, what do you think a person would need to be able to do? To get a B? or a C?' Together, we then build criteria that they will be judged on. In this way, the students can't say the course is too hard or unfair, and they have a chance to step into the shoes of the people who will be judging them—indeed, the people who will be depending on them."

The Office Simulation

Students can practice the "four Rs" directly when they work in ACHIEVE's Model Office—four complete workstations crammed tightly into the rear of the classroom, each with its own secretarial return, computer, phone, calculator, file cabinet, in and out boxes, and everything else one would find at a private desk in an office. The fax machine is nearby, as are the students' mail slots and shelves for storing the boxes containing their professional belongings—files, pens, highlighters, dictionaries and so forth. The cramped conditions are part necessity, part virtue. As one graduate put it, "If I had been comfortable at ACHIEVE, I probably would have been disappointed when I moved into the cubicle at my real job. Instead, I was, like, 'Hey, I can really stretch *out* here.'"

Students work in ACHIEVE's Model Office Simulation (MOS) for about 10 days at a time, with each student spending approximately four weeks there over the course of the training cycle. Working in the Model Office does not exempt them from whatever is going on in class—it is additional. Balancing the office work against the demands of periodic classroom lectures, which are normally confined to mornings, is part of the challenge. "They've got to understand," says instructor Judy Kittleson, "that [in a real office] sometimes they're going to have to attend staff meetings, even when they've got a lot of work to do, and they're going to have to give their undivided attention." The afternoon "lab" period, when students work independently on mostly self-guided projects, provides a little more quiet for the MOS workers—but they are not exempt from the lab work as they carry out their office responsibilities.

While working in the Model Office, students help cover ACHIEVE's phone and reception duties, negotiating among themselves how to divide the coverage. MOS students also take care of mail, filing, copying and any other real-world needs that arise in the ACHIEVE office. In addition, they have exercises and activities specific to the MOS that they must finish by certain deadlines, like writing and faxing memos, compiling an individual "How-Do-I?" manual, and writing out procedures for various office machines.

All these activities are in addition to whatever assignments and exercises are being done in the class at large—the model cubicles open onto the class space, so students are effectively in both environments at once. While they balance their attention between the two worlds, students have complete discretion to decide when they are going to do which tasks, as long as they meet their deadlines. Again, the arrangement makes an important culture-of-work virtue out of a tight scheduling necessity: the need to squeeze a work simulation into the course's tight time frame also helps students learn to organize conflicting demands and keep their cool.

More subtly, it helps them ease into the world of desks, in boxes and cubicles—an environment that most have never experienced and that may at first seem alien, confining and intimidating. When it is their turn to occupy a desk in the MOS area, students usually arrange and adjust everything so that they make it their own. A graduate explained, "I had never sat at a desk in an office before. [MOS] wasn't quite the same, but it helped me get used to it."

Dean Pfotenhauer sums up the philosophy of the Model Office: "In general, none of us transfers skills well by listening to someone talk about how to do something. You have to apply it to a specific context and use it in that context before you can be confident that you've mastered that skill. The more ACHIEVE's students can apply the instruction to the actual situations they will face, the more effective it is."

A Virtual Workplace

To some extent, in fact, ACHIEVE is not a training program with an office component; rather, it is a training office—as much as possible, the environment and schedule are conceived and carried out as if the students were already in an office environment and receiving training on the job. Even many routine administrative needs of the program are turned over to students to solve as a practice exercise. When the program's projector needed a dust cover, for instance, the class was told to write a memo requisitioning the cover and justifying the expense (the costly machine would deteriorate without an inexpensive cover).

Even routine learning drills tend to be organized as office work. Every day, students fill out a "Daily Individual Goals (DIG) sheet," a version of the to-do list that any office worker would recognize. The list includes the daily work plan and what projects are due by the end of the day, what new vocabulary they learned, and what new computer skills were practiced. The form is reviewed and corrected each day. In this way, the students discuss and review what they learned that day, then use this accumulated information to write an Individual Monthly Report that in many ways resembles a resume.

"Basic Task Groups" likewise spin a training opportunity—in both hard and soft skills—out of the program's daily drudge work. One member of each MOS group is part of an office task group. Students can choose their task assignment from a standard list: lead clerk, equipment clerk, lab clerk and suite clerk. But task groups rotate, and eventually every student will share in each task. The tasks are essential to the smooth operation of the program, but they are also basic: Equipment clerks take out and put away the typewriters; lab clerks keep the MOS area tidy; suite clerks open up and close the regular classroom; and lead clerks facilitate discussion and handle filing.

The tasks may be dull, but to accomplish them, the students need to work as a team. On the last day before the tasks are rotated, Chisholm typically asks each group to come up with recommendations and additional instructions for their successors "so they do a better job based on your experience." The groups plunge in, writing up new job descriptions and instructions and deciding on recommendations together, with some facilitating and the occasional leading question from Chisholm. As basic as the subject matter was, the students usually rise to the challenge of finding clever improvements. They then write up their recommendations and make presentations to the rest of the class.

On the surface, the simulations, mock procedures and team exercises are organized around the hard-skill fundamentals of office work: writing, typing, organizing projects, assessing progress and so on. But just beneath the veneer of textbook skills is a foundation of social and personal development every bit as important to the program as typing speeds and effective presentations: learning to deal effectively

with supervisors and colleagues, to handle stress and rebound from mistakes, and to look constantly for ways of making things better. Reflection, in ACHIEVE's world, is a way of internalizing training—to become, in a sense, your own trainer, critic and coach.

Practically everything the students do becomes a writing exercise—a combination of English composition, typing and reflection. The Individual Monthly Report, written in the style of a resume, breaks down week by week everything that they have done in the course. They periodically write a "Who Am I?" essay that gets more personal. Three-month and six-month progress reports then lead to individual conferences during which strengths and weaknesses are discussed privately, with students signing plans on how they are going to improve in their weak areas.

Says Chisholm, "We have to give them the tools, the strategies to make adaptations in their lives, to make those adjustments. We're empowering students to interact in the workplace in a positive, yet assertive way. They're not taught to be passive, to accept the status quo. They're able to evaluate a situation and figure out how to achieve a specific goal, then suggest solutions that work in a professional manner."

Sweating

THE SMALL STUFF

Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow

Brooklyn, New York

"They correct you *all the time*," says a trainee at Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT), a 17-year-old program in the rough streets of Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood. The last three words emphatically sum up the program's most striking feature: its unblinking attention to detail. But then she adds, "Not 'cause they're mean; it's because they want you to do good."

A teacher quickly snaps: "Do *well*."

Actually, make that "manager," not "teacher." Counselors are "supervisors." For all its relentlessness in drilling both technical and social correctness, OBT goes to great lengths to distinguish itself from high school, an environment in which most of its students did not thrive. (Seventy percent of the average class reads at an eighth-grade level or lower, and less than 50 percent received high school diplomas or passed the equivalency test.) OBT expects its students—called "clients"—to learn what most of them did not learn in school. But it keeps their sights trained forward toward the workplace, not backward to the classroom.

"Broken Windows"

On entering OBT, the typical client may at first feel barraged by corrections, reminders, prompting and nudging ("At first I was like, look at all these *rules!*"). Lapses of grammar or posture, a chin resting on a hand, speaking out of turn, the merest hint of street slang, all draw immediate comment. Trainees are constantly interrupted mid-sentence for using such forbidden words as "aks," "youse" and "ain't." The correction often comes with an explanation—but a short, quick one. Attention never wanders far from the matter at hand, and trainees are encouraged to speak up (without interrupting), not to hold their tongue for fear of some slip. The instructors' corrections are usually phrased as gentle reminders, sometimes accompanied by a

comic roll of the eyes or a theatrical sigh; often they are no more than subtle hand signals to cease and desist.

To borrow an analogy, OBT is the training world's embodiment of the "Broken Windows" theory of law enforcement. In the doctrine of policing reformer George Kelling, careful enforcement of the minor rules of order and civility makes people less likely even to consider more serious infractions. Leaving one broken window unrepaired, Kelling argues, invites more vandalism and chaos, and soon all the windows are broken.

Likewise, at OBT, it is the attention to minor rules that makes major problems rarer. Enforcement of the dress code, for example, is so strict that the executive director recalls (with an embarrassed laugh) the day she turned away a major funder from OBT's front door because the foundation's representative was wearing a mini-skirt. "I stopped her as she was walking up the steps and sent her home. No way was I going to let my clients see her dressed like that for work. I'd never hear the end of it."

Attention to the small-but-critical mistakes may seem at first glance like hectoring, but it is always in the context of the expectations waiting for clients in "the real world" of corporate employment. OBT trainees punch a time clock, wear business dress and focus their studies on mastering the practical skills that will help them survive in the mostly clerical positions for which they are preparing. When they misstep, they will hear about it just as they would from a future employer—albeit one speaking rapid, no-nonsense Brooklynese and wearing a blue habit.

Sister Mary Franciscus, a Sister of Mercy and former parochial school principal, created OBT with two former co-workers from Brooklyn's St. Agatha's School. They started by working with a neighborhood high school equivalency program that the local community board had asked them to improve. But they quickly concluded that a diploma program alone would not work for most high school dropouts in Sunset Park, an area that struggles with youth gangs, drugs and ethnic tensions. So they started by expanding the program to teach typing and other clerical skills. They added computers in the early 1990s. Next came English as a Second Language (ESL) to serve the increasing number of immigrants in Sunset Park.

By then, the program was also receiving more and more inquiries from slightly older people, some formerly homeless or recently released from prison, who needed job training but did not meet the strict age limits (17 to 22) that came with funding from the city's Youth and Employment Departments. So Sister Mary and her team raised money from other government sources, including the federal Displaced Worker program, to accommodate the population mix. And they started holding GED and ESL classes in the evenings.

The OBT "tough love" approach does not always suit the older participants as well as it does their younger, more malleable peers, although job placement rates are comparable. Says one manager, "They're often very set in their ways and challenge the program's methods. The younger trainees trust us more and are willing to take our word that what they learn here is going to help them to get a job."

Drill, discussion, practice—and an introduction to the world

Throughout their six daily classes, or "labs" in Business English, Business Math, Typing, Microsoft Office, Office Procedures and "World of Work," discussion is constant, and all clients must participate. It is that constant give and take along with the palpable concern and solicitousness of the instructors that distinguishes the constant drilling and testing in these courses from the rigors of high school. The discussion not only livens up the training atmosphere, it also keeps the participants practicing the one soft skill that, most practitioners agree, makes the greatest difference to future success: clear, correct, courteous communication.

The discussion also gives managers a forum for constantly reminding trainees how their work at OBT relates to the demands of a future workplace. In an Office Procedures course taught by manager Sarah Sawhney, for example, the regular drills on vocabulary, spelling, alphabetizing and math are supplemented by geography, the language of business and current events. On the last subject, participants are often painfully out of touch. Late in the 2000 presidential campaign, for example, they were unable to name either candidate. No one in the room even knew whether the Mets and Yankees had won their games the previous night (both were on their way to winning their league's pennants that season).

Sawhney erupted, "You have to watch the news! Who's the biggest Yankee fan in New York?"

Easy question. The group answers in unison, "Sister Mary!"

"Right," Sawhney laughs. "Now, do you think I'd have a job today if I didn't know something about the Yankees? When you go for an interview, are they going to ask about your health? About your boyfriend? No! They don't care about those things! You've got to be able to talk to them about what's going on in the world, so you sound smart. Am I smart? No. But I can talk about what's in the newspaper."

And with that, Sawhney starts handing out homework assignments on various subjects currently in the news. The group accepts them like prison sentences. One whines, "I try to watch the news on TV, but it's so-o bo-o-o-ring." Sawhney snaps back, "Car crashes are boring? That doctor who murdered her parents is boring?" (One client says excitedly, "Oh, I heard about that!").

Sawhney knows it will take more than a few homework assignments to break down this ingrained cultural isolation. But she has

kept at it all week, drilling and exhorting away. And she cannot help smiling when she sees a *New York Post* peeking out of one trainee's bag. It is obviously unread, as pristine as when it rolled off the press, but at least it's a start.

"World of Work"

Of all the courses in the OBT curriculum, the one called "World of Work" is the most different from the high school classes that failed the participants their first time around. In World of Work, participants develop resumes and participate in collaborative assignments, like one that took place soon after Sarah Sawhney's lecture on the daily news during the Office Procedures class. In World of Work, clients had to make a presentation on the presidential race then under way.

The assignment, of course, was less about the presidency than about teamwork, research and public performance. Taught by OBT's three job developers—the people who work most closely with prospective employers—the course focuses on public speaking and how people present themselves in business and in life. Participants observe and critique each other on how they come across in various situations, with special emphasis on the job interview. When they are not presenting, group members are role playing as employers.

Within the first two weeks of World of Work, trainees begin assembling a Personal Data Sheet, a document that lists all personal information that has any bearing on employment. "Usually clients will say that they don't remember how long they worked at the supermarket or when they started an internship," says Mary Anne Panzo-Sheridan, a job developer. "The data sheet lets them put everything down without the pressure of creating a resume out of thin air."

By the second month of the program, participants draft resumes using a template developed in the computer course. They do some of the work, in fact, as part of their computer training, but the resume is reviewed and polished in the World of Work course. All three of the job developers review each one ("as many eyes as possible"), both in and out of class, until the document is considered complete. The point is not just to develop a good, crisp resume, but more broadly it also helps trainees view their experience as an asset, to find the elements of their past that might persuade an employer to hire them, and to recognize that the "world of work" is a place in which they must play roles and capitalize on traits and abilities that are valued in that world—regardless of the personal "style" that governs their private life.

Although OBT does not use a workplace simulation like others described in this report, its teacher-managers are constantly at pains to review every moment of the OBT day as an object lesson in the demands of the "world of work." On another occasion when Sawhney's trainees were unhappy about a homework

assignment, she half jokingly said, "If you complain, I'll give you even more. I can make your life miserable, you know."

This instantly provided an occasion for a riff on different managerial styles—to wit: While the clients may all get good jobs when they leave OBT, they may not all get good bosses. The tough ones need to be played up to. You have to adopt a style of behavior that works, and keep your private impulses to yourself. She wraps it all up with a lesson about the importance of *acting:* that just as she performs in a certain way while leading the course, it will be necessary for them to *act* in a manner acceptable in the office environment.

"When you go on a job interview, you can't just be yourself. You need to act like a person who will be a good employee, just like I'm acting up here to keep you interested, to keep you learning, on your toes. Do you think I'm like this at home? No!" She pauses for effect. "I'm even meaner at home." The group laughs, and this time even she lets out a smile.

Understanding by Grilling

Trainees arrive at OBT after an exacting succession of interviews and paperwork on welfare, work history, family and immigration status, and personal identification. It is designed primarily to help the staff understand each client better (and to maintain records for OBT's contract compliance). But it is also a way of making sure that trainees are at least motivated enough to follow up on successive appointments and requests for information. OBT fills nearly all of its slots by word of mouth. Its reputation for strictness is apparently leavened by a "buzz" on the street that the rewards of the program are worth the hassle. Not only does the program consistently meet its enrollment goal of 100 to 120 participants a semester, but it is not unusual for brothers and sisters to follow each other through the program. In one recent semester, the mother of a previous graduate enrolled in OBT when she saw what the program had done for her daughter.

Yet however much the demands of the enrollment process may seem like a high-hurdle race, that is just the beginning of the staff's search for information and insights into the clients' lives and needs. Next, after the first two weeks at OBT, participants face the assessment process—a grilling in front of staff and peers that looks to some almost like a kind of tribunal. On assessment days, groups of five trainees rotate through a series of three 45-minute question-and-answer sessions, each attended by five staff members, with clients and staff facing each other across two rows of desks. Participants are asked in front of the others about their education and work histories, family situations, child care arrangements, self-images, career goals and why they are at OBT.

Staff may raise issues like criminal records and bad credit histories that could disqualify participants from particular jobs (in banking, for instance). Although some of the information is known to many of the

staff, the assessment serves as a formal opportunity to discuss and question all of the issues pertinent to the clients' prospects for success. And it gives trainees the first cold dose of OBT's insistence on polished, well-considered speech.

It also makes clear that trainees' lives are up for review at OBT. Staff will zero in on why a participant quit a job, why she does not collect child support from her child's father, what she thinks about the program rules, how much she expects to earn on her first job, and where she sees herself in five years. The questions are pointed but gently posed, and while the public setting can sometimes make them sound harsh, a healthy dose of humor and verbal support from staff soften the blows.

The answers at one recent assessment paint a daunting picture of the challenges ahead: In one day's sessions, all of the participants were women (typically only 15 percent of OBT's participants are male), nearly all between the ages of 17 and 24, and all but two of them had two children or more with no fathers present. Most live with their mothers, most of whom also do not work. Some of the questions are logistical, like "Who's your back-up child care?" Others offer opportunities for the participants to focus on their positive qualities.

In another early taste of life at OBT, the clients' answers to assessment questions are often interrupted with coaching ("Speak up! You can't talk like a little girl, or they won't hire you"). Participants are warned that assessment (like landing a job) is a kind of trial, and they understand that their performance there will determine whether they can remain in the program. (Assessments do occasionally result in a client being referred elsewhere, but this is rare—typically no more than one or two trainees per cycle are referred to pre-GED and remedial programs or to trade schools.) And although some staff attempt to reassure them beforehand that the three hours in assessment are not absolutely critical to their future, they are allowed to experience a certain discomfort in preparation for the all-important interview process.

Immediately after the three 45-minute assessment sessions, the staff meets for lunch and discusses each case, sharing notes from the different sessions and the staff members' sometimes-conflicting impressions. What starts out as a free-for-all of opinions among the staff gradually simmers down to a systematic survey of the strengths and weaknesses of each client, followed by a consensus vote on whether to keep them in OBT or refer them elsewhere. The tone is noticeably more supportive and concerned than in the assessment session itself: "I don't care about any of the other problems she has; if she can do two years at McDonald's, she can do anything."

This staff discussion about participants' needs and possibilities continues, in informal but regular ways, throughout each group's 22 weeks at OBT. The most frequent of these stock-taking discussions

are at lunch, when the faculty gets some quiet time together. At lunchtime, all clients are required to punch out and leave the building, and the staff gathers around a single table to eat their meal. The conversation draws on the staff's formidable collective memory: A trainee's relation to others in this or previous enrollment cycles is always remarked on; even in the first weeks, *someone* on the staff knows their mothers, sisters, where they live and what they are up against.

The informal daily gathering functions as an oral history encyclopedia, used to keep the program's eye on the client who did not show up the day before, to discuss who is ready to go on interviews, to share information on a new potential employer, or to note which trainees need extra counseling because of a family problem at home. Although the gathering is completely informal, it appears to be an invaluable management and team-building tool, not only for Sister Mary but also for all the staff.

Battling Long Odds

At its core, OBT's approach to soft skills aims at internalizing the relentless discipline that participants encounter every day in the program. OBT succeeds in a sense when a trainee's inner voice begins to say "sit straight," "speak up," "don't say *aks*." This running inner commentary is an asset that luckier young people develop at home, in religious and social circles, or in effective schools. OBT's clients are not so lucky.

Besides the trouble most clients have had in school, they come with other burdens that make their situation tougher. The vast majority are young women, 65 percent have children, and nearly all are single. More than three-quarters are Hispanic, and nearly 60 percent speak English as a second language. A history in jails, gangs, youth facilities and homeless shelters is not uncommon.

Yet the mix of drilling, constant discussion, role playing and staff support seems to work. More than 75 percent of OBT's students end up in jobs that pay between $7.50 and $12 an hour by the time the program's 22 weeks are up. OBT's word-of-mouth enrollment draws clients from all over Brooklyn, with some commuting up to an hour each way to attend.

Yet like many of the tougher approaches to soft skills, OBT inevitably confronts some skepticism. As Sister Mary recalls, "When one funder first saw the program, the president was taken aback by our style. She thought we were too structured. But her assistant was there, too, bless his heart. And he said, 'No, I was like these kids; this is where I come from. They need this.' And they've been in our corner ever since."

SIMULaTION

YMCA of Greater Boston/ Training, Inc.

Boston, Massachusetts

It was 10 o'clock in the morning at the Lester Hill Corporation, and everyone in the warehouse department was out with the flu. Shirley Hanson's boss had day care difficulties and would not be in until the afternoon, if at all. So Hanson would have to take care of the problem herself.

Thinking quickly, she asked Jean-Pierre in the "traffic" division to check inventory on some of the warehouse orders, knowing she would still have to pull someone else out of the billing department to keep up with the other orders that would come in as the day progressed. That meant she would have to train that person in the entire ordering procedure in less than 15 minutes because Francine in the accounting department still needed to be taught how to enter invoice approvals.

Shirley finished her second cup of coffee, pushed back from her desk, and smiled. It was going to be a chaotic morning, but she knew she would not let Lester Hill's customers down.

The situation, although stressful, is not all that unusual. But the same cannot be said of the Lester Hill Corporation itself. The first thing that sets it apart from other businesses facing the occasional staffing crisis is that Lester Hill does not exist. It is a mock business, or simulation, but it is a strikingly complete and realistic one. It is the centerpiece of the Boston YMCA's employment program, Training, Inc.—one of six Training, Inc. programs in a nationwide network.

The top-to-bottom simulation is complete with catalogs, products, warehouses, departments and even customers (mostly volunteers from Boston's business community who know firsthand what an impatient customer sounds like). The total-immersion exercise lets participants experience work in a realistic office environment in which they can learn the cooperative skills they will need in real businesses, without the risk that a slip-up will cost them their livelihoods.

Says Training, Inc. Executive Director Willard Pinn, "We try to teach participants to learn how to face stressful situations without yelling, screaming, crying, and then running away. We get them to understand that the course gives them strength, the strength that allows them to negotiate these problems."

The Virtual Workplace

Although it occurs only in the second month of an 18-week training program, the "Lester Hill" job-simulation exercise is where all the elements of the program come together. Developed by the McGraw-Hill Company more than 30 years ago, Training, Inc. managers have modified it over the years, almost beyond recognition, to increase its relevance to today's job market. (The most obvious change has been introducing computers.) In the simulation, trainees apply for and fill positions in the fictitious supply company Lester Hill; then they participate in every aspect of its operation, from taking orders over the phone, to ordering merchandise released from the warehouse or purchased from an imaginary outside wholesaler called Tallidata (also run by trainees), to shipping the supplies out to their virtual customers.

Considering that all of this is technically make-believe, the level of detail in the simulation materials and the roles played by staff and volunteers make for a surprising level of reality. Tasks need to be completed and schedules adhered to, managers must inspire staff, and customers must be served. Trainees in managerial roles even pay attention to the company's bottom line, making decisions that balance profit concerns with serving customers effectively. By the final week of the simulation, the stress and satisfaction felt by the participants are very real.

The taste of virtual employment appears to strike a resounding chord with the participants. At the end of the program, no one seemed to resent the fact that they had just spent weeks of stress and turmoil on something that simply evaporated. Instead, several of them proposed that in the next semester Training, Inc. take the ruse one step further and start by telling the next group of trainees that what they are doing is in fact real.

While it is perhaps the most strenuous and invigorating activity in the program, and the one participants talk about most, the fact that the job simulation occurs for less than a quarter of the cycle hints at its limitations were it not for the buttress of a much broader curriculum. In fact, even when the job simulation is in full swing, it still takes up only three hours a day, and trainees still spend the other three hours practicing their keyboarding and other office skills.

"Lester Hill allows our trainees to gain valuable office experience," says Stephanie Grell, a job developer. "But if they're not typing at least 25 words a minute by the end of the semester, or if they don't know

how to use Microsoft Word, they're still not going to be employable in an office. Learning the hard skills is just as essential."

The business simulation exercise is neither the first nor the main vehicle for focusing participants' attention on social and behavioral issues. But because it so completely reflects the program's integration of "soft" and "hard" training and because it is among the most highly developed work simulations anywhere, we begin with a detailed look at the Lester Hill experience and then broaden the scope to the remaining 14 weeks of the Training, Inc. learning cycle.

How Lester Hill Works

A week before the job simulation begins, Training, Inc. staff post job descriptions and take applications for 20 to 25 different job titles at the imaginary company. The model can be expanded or contracted depending on the enrollment in each cycle. No one, of course, is in danger of not getting a job. Available jobs range from data-entry clerks working in the billing department, to customer service representatives fielding phone calls, to seven managerial positions that require all the people skills and diplomacy of real-world management. Participants apply for three positions each, indicating their preferences. They get almost no counseling or advice in choosing. "Very rarely," says Jim Kilgore, deputy director, "if we see that someone we think has management potential has applied for a data-entry job, we will advise them to think bigger. But mostly we just let them make their own decisions."

Staff members go through the applications, using their knowledge of trainees that they have gained over the past six or seven weeks to place participants in positions that suit their abilities. The following Monday, the participants are told which division in the company has hired them and the name of their supervisor. A manual describes the tasks and responsibilities of each division in step-by-step detail. Although the newly appointed managers are not saddled with a fixed goal for profits, they do take out an imaginary working capital loan to accompany the virtual inventory they inherit.

To make a profit or at least keep solvent, Lester Hill's new managers may find that they have to make changes, like transferring staff from one department to another. But disruptions like that may slow down the number of orders filled and thus affect their imaginary bottom line. "It's interesting to observe how different management teams approach the model," says Kilgore. "Eventually they realize that adjustments have to be made, and when people are placed into new positions, they have to be trained. Often the best learning is when they have to explain to someone else how to do something they've mastered themselves."

In a post-simulation review, trainees who held managerial positions expressed frustration with having to learn Lester Hill's procedures right along with their

subordinates, with little guidance from Training, Inc. staff. But the confusion and uncertainty of the first week are intentional. Real managers face the same quandaries, and real subordinates must take orders from people with little expertise. To further encourage this sink-or-swim dynamic, trainees must treat staff as outside consultants, going to them for guidance only as a last resort. And in that case, the company will have to cut a check to pay for the "consultant's" advice—once again draining their virtual bottom line.

One of the first challenges of "management" is maintaining the workflow. Lester Hill is ostensibly a hotel and business supplier, providing large quantities of beds, sheets, kitchen equipment, cleaning supplies, office furniture, and any other supplies needed by large institutions and corporate customers like college dormitories, hospitals, summer camps and Fortune 500 companies. The imaginary firm has an extensive catalog with product codes and price lists that has been distributed to the trainees as well as to corporate volunteers who pose as customers. The volunteers, who are usually recruited from employers of past Training, Inc. graduates, take a few minutes out of their regular workday to call in an order. Lester Hill's customer service representatives in turn take the calls and fill out the order forms, fielding as many as 15 calls a day. The volunteer customers are usually supportive, but sometimes they are purposefully impatient or even rude to test the customer service skills of the trainees. Says Diana Moseby, a recent Lester Hill customer service representative, "Sometimes I even like to get the hard-to-please customers because it's kind of a challenge to me. I try to hold my tongue and see if I can get them to smile before they finally hang up."

"You're not a manager if you can't handle the problems that come up," says Keisha Miller, the Lester Hill general manager one recent semester. "The worst was just trying to give people enough to do on the first couple of days. The customer service reps and the warehouse department were busy, but it takes a while before the forms finally make it out to billing and accounting."

After the order is filled out longhand by the customer service rep, another sales rep enters it into the computer. It is then passed along to the warehouse workers, who check the computer to see whether the item is in stock. Once the item is located and ready to ship, the shipping charges are calculated by the traffic department, and billing prepares an invoice. Accounting double-checks the transaction, and all the paperwork is generated and filed. There are no virtual forklifts for warehouse workers to mount in search of products to deliver. But if the computer shows an item is not in stock, they have to write up an order form and send it to Tallidata, a wholesaler located in another office at Training, Inc. The Tallidata employees—also trainees—then check their own supplies and complete forms that record the transaction.

Seeing the World Through a Boss's Eyes

While participants get plenty of practice at putting their data entry and other computer skills to work during the simulation, they also have to exercise judgment at every step of the process, making quick decisions to keep the ever-growing pile of orders moving. If only some of the items ordered through the sales department are in stock, for instance, the warehouse staff must decide whether to send out an incomplete order with the remainder to go out later or whether to hold the whole order for shipment until it is complete. The decision has ramifications for the Lester Hill bottom line: Do they incur the additional shipping charges for two deliveries or risk losing the customer, who might choose to cancel and go elsewhere?

The trainee-managers are faced with these types of decisions every day, as well as the usual personnel headaches. Sometimes they show less patience with their "employees" than staff does with them. "If I could tell you how many times somebody asked me to tell them how to do something," Shirley Hanson, a recent assistant general manager of Lester Hill, says with a roll of her eyes. "I mean, even managers will come and ask me to show them how to use a form or something, and I've never even seen this form! All I do is read the instructions with them and figure it out that way. If they had done that in the first place, they wouldn't need me. But their first reaction is 'I can't do this, I'll go get Shirley.'"

Hanson's reaction is familiar to most employers, but by the second week, Lester Hill's "employees" have already started to take matters into their own hands. Line employees often take on projects that lie beyond their job descriptions, as was the case with Taisha McCall, who worked in personnel one semester and rewrote the entire Lester Hill employee handbook to match her higher standards. "I just couldn't hand it out in the state it was in when I got it," she said. "There were spelling errors and typos, and it didn't even answer the questions most people had about work rules and overtime."

McCall smiles when she says this, recalling that the whole exercise is a fantasy. But at the same time, she is obviously proud of her work. Future cycles will use her new handbook and, ideally, some successor will improve it further. This constant reworking and augmenting of the simulation's materials forces trainees to examine and exercise their new skills even as it gives them a chance to make a real difference—even in something that is not fundamentally real.

By trying to make the experience as lifelike as possible for the participants, the program confronts all the motivation and morale problems that affect real companies. For example, because of the strong network of volunteer "customers," service representatives find their imaginary jobs challenging and satisfying fairly quickly. But those in the less busy Tallidata company often have to wait longer for work to finally come their

way. Sometimes the orders do not take up enough of their day. But tedium and downtime are part of real jobs, too.

The real-life experience becomes most successful when the stress of the work leads to interpersonal conflicts. "We [recently] put one participant, who was somewhat strident and rough-edged in her dealings with the rest of the trainees, in charge of one of the departments," Pinn recalls with a chuckle, "knowing that there'd be some sparks. By the end of the day, we had a mutiny on our hands. It could have been a disaster, but we knew we had to do it—both for her sake, so that she could see the results of her management style and try to moderate it, and for the other participants, who are going to have to learn how to deal with some bosses who aren't so fair or diplomatic."

Allowing trainees so much independence can have risks, but Training, Inc. staff try to keep tabs on the tenor of the simulation, and they will step in if help is really needed. "There's a chain of command within Lester Hill, from employees, to department managers, to the general manager's office," says Kilgore, "and we do expect them to follow that. But we also try to listen in on what's going on, and we'll help them out for free by asking leading questions, that sort of thing. And if it's a computer problem or something like that, outside of the province of the simulation, then we jump right in and fix it."

The emphasis on management skills may seem out of place in a program designed to help unskilled workers land entry-level office jobs. But it pays dividends almost immediately by forcing participants to see their job performance through management's eyes. The importance of mastering the soft skills of cooperation, giving and taking supervision, and conflict resolution becomes manifest more quickly in the simulation than in a classroom setting. Says Pinn, "They not only learn how to act in a office more quickly, but it gets them to start thinking about what they like and don't like about the work, what they're good at and where they need to improve. Finally, it makes them think about promotion and career tracks: How can they keep improving themselves after they get a job?"

The results are impressive. By the third week of the simulation, Lester Hill is humming along, with little oversight from Training, Inc. staff. When the job simulation is in full swing, the boundaries between trainee and staff, program and job simulation, become less and less evident as some program staff give up their offices to job-simulation activities or work side by side with trainees on other Training, Inc. projects, such as planning graduation ceremonies or developing volunteer resources. By the seventh week, with six of the program participants working in staff offices as managers in the simulation, it becomes difficult to distinguish who works for Lester Hill and who works for Training, Inc.—difficult even to tell which business is the real one.

Trainee Profile

To draw participants for each cycle, Antonia Marroquin, the one full-time staff member responsible for recruitment, speaks or sends flyers to churches and community centers in low-income neighborhoods, welfare centers, homeless shelters and wherever unemployed or underemployed people may congregate. She can tout the program's 16-year history and its high placement record, but her main drawing card is herself: She graduated from Training, Inc.'s 45th cycle before being hired by the program.

Each Training, Inc. cycle begins with a roster of roughly 40 enrollees. Typically, about 70 percent of them are on welfare, 20 percent on unemployment and the rest on privately funded scholarships. The classes are made up predominantly of women—usually well over 90 percent. According to Pinn, this seems to be a consequence of the type of jobs in which Training, Inc. specializes: mostly administrative support, data entry and receptionist positions still held more often by women. Slightly more than half the women in the average class have children at home. The make-up of the classes reflects the ethnic diversity of the Boston area, with three-quarters evenly divided among black, white and Hispanic participants (including a large number of Caribbean immigrants); the remaining quarter of the enrollment is a combination of Eastern European and Asian immigrants. Fully half of the participants speak English as a second language.

Marroquin's background as a former client is a useful part of her recruitment drive, but it becomes even more useful once the program starts. "After the first week or so, most of my time is spent encouraging and supporting the trainees as they try to keep up with all the work. I've got to show them that I could do it, and there's really no difference between them and me, except a few years at work." She makes a particular effort with those whose success is jeopardized by poor attendance and punctuality. "Most attendance problems come out of difficulties with day care, so I've got a lot of resources that I can share with the clients to solve those issues. When someone misses two days in the first two weeks, they will get a written warning, and we'll draw up an attendance plan together, acknowledging the problems they're having and how we're going to solve them. They're on probation for a month then, and if they keep having attendance problems, they'll have to leave the program. If they make it through the probation period and they begin to have attendance issues again, we treat it as a clean slate. They can stay, but they go back on probation."

Marroquin's success in promoting Training, Inc. has helped to attract a population that is somewhat more motivated than what other programs enjoy. While the program draws almost exclusively from welfare recipients and unskilled and unemployed people throughout Boston, it requires that all participants have a high school or general equivalency diploma

(some applicants are allowed to begin the program if they have passed at least three of the five GED test sections and will complete them all before the end of the semester). In addition, the program requires near-perfect attendance from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., five days a week, for 18 weeks—a bigger commitment than what most of the other Boston job-training programs demand.

Despite such a high percentage of participants on welfare or with other poverty-related barriers, a close inspection of a wall displaying the previous cycle's resumes reveals surprising pockets of significant job experience among these mostly unproven future employees. A fifth of the resumes shows almost no employment outside of internships arranged through Training, Inc., and another fifth exhibit spotty work histories that feature short tenures in dead-end jobs. However, another third of the resumes reveals extensive job histories in unskilled or semi-skilled labor. Some of these participants have been laid off and unemployed for extended periods of time; others intend to use Training, Inc. to break into career positions in white-collar industries unavailable to them without the program's placement assistance and support. The remainder consists of foreign-born residents, some with extensive work histories, albeit in another country and another language.

A Corporate Atmosphere... with a Heart

The attempt to create an authentic work experience does not wait for the start of the job simulation in the fifth week. It begins on the first day of instruction. "Quite intentionally," says Pinn, "we've tried to recreate the type of workplace our clients are going to go into. There's a reason this office is right downtown in the financial district: To a lot of our clients, downtown is another *country*. Even though we have to pay more in rent, it's essential that they get used to coming here, until pretty soon they start to see downtown as *their* neighborhood, a place in which *they belong*."

Just blocks away from many of the trainees' eventual employers, mostly in the financial services industry, the Training, Inc. offices exude a decidedly corporate air. The carpeted and tastefully decorated rooms, the modern workstations and the traditional office layout could be turned over to a bank's back-office operations without modification. The computers used by trainees are set up in the six largest of the office's 12 rooms. These rooms serve as lab space, offices during the job simulation, and work areas for trainees using the Internet for job searches and other research activities (almost all participants spend at least some time after program hours practicing online and other computer skills at the readily available computers). Trainees and staff observe the same standard rules of business dress and behavior, and many of the tasks to

operate the program itself are done by trainees, including the Training, Inc. receptionist position, which is covered almost entirely by trainees in morning and afternoon shifts.

Although some programs find it helpful to erect a wall of authority around teachers and coaches—both to enforce high standards and to teach students how to deal constructively with superiors—Training, Inc. takes a more collegial approach. From the first day of training, staff makes a conscious effort to treat trainees as co-workers rather than as clients. Says Pinn, "We don't like to call them students, partly because many of them had a bad experience in school, but more important because to call them students would imply that they are in school. We want them to think of Training, Inc. as being work." Courses bear more resemblance to a college seminar than to a high school classroom. Trainers' statements are open to extensive discussion, and participants are expected to learn as much from their interactions with each other as they are from instructors. Program rules are explained and justified repeatedly in the broader context of the participants' future employment; peer pressure is expected to be as powerful an enforcement tool as the program staff's authority.

For instance, while the dress code is business formal and smoking, chewing gum and eating in the work areas are not allowed, the rules are enforced in a non-confrontational way and are always explained in terms that frame proper behavior not as an outside imposition but as a personal choice. Even the program's handbook explains the dress code as a way of "presenting the 'Right You'" rather than as dictates that must be followed.

Of course, confrontations do arise, and participants who often have never had positive experiences in education are apt to challenge anything they perceive as excessive authority. According to Katy Roberts, a program trainer, Training, Inc.'s enforcement mechanisms are always being fine-tuned in search of the right balance between serving the neediest and maintaining an effective program. "As a social services organization," she says, "we don't want to kick someone out who has been excluded from previous educational opportunities. But it's important for trainees to learn to obey a dress code in order to be ready for their new jobs. When someone comes to the program in jeans, for example, we talk to them the first time, but the second time we might have to send them home. Which is not great because then they're missing that day's training. But if you don't do it right away at the beginning of the cycle, it's very difficult to try and enforce the rules later." A closet of clothes at the program's offices provides another option for trainees who repeatedly violate the dress code.

For other, more serious behavioral problems, Training, Inc. uses a combination of private counseling and peer pressure.

Roberts continues, "We try to create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, where people can joke with each other, even tease each other, without it being threatening. It allows participants to call each other on things like being late or being inappropriately dressed without it always coming from the staff. When you trust your peers and you're hearing it from them, it's often more effective." "But we would never want to embarrass anybody in front of a class," adds counselor and trainer Leigh Hewlett. "If it's serious, it's always better to wait until you can talk one on one."

As the program's counselor, Hewlett sees all of the trainees at one time or another during the program, but she is backed up by Training, Inc.'s "supervisor" system. Each staff member, except for the director and the job developer, serves as a supervisor for five to seven participants, allowing them to take a special interest in those participants' progress through the program.

Training, Inc.'s third layer of support for its trainees—behind the counselor and the supervisor network—is a system of support networks among participants themselves. Early in the program, participants are divided into three "teams" of about 12 each, nicknamed the "Professionals," "Specialists" and "Promotables." There is no hierarchy among the teams; the names are meant solely to create an esprit de corps. Trainees attend labs with the other members of their team, although they will interact with others in the job simulation, daily assemblies and other forums. Each group has a deliberately diverse composition, with different ethnicities, languages, job experiences and ages mixed together so that the individuals' various strengths, skills and knowledge can be of most use to the others, and trainees have opportunities to learn from and work with people from different backgrounds.

Teaching Human Relations

The business simulation, the program's corporate atmosphere, and the web of personal reinforcement and team building that pervades the program all serve to integrate soft skills training into participants' daily experience. But like other successful workforce development programs, Training, Inc. addresses soft skills head-on as well, in a morning briefing, in talks by visiting businesspeople, and most consistently in an hour of every day dedicated specifically to the topic.

In the first three weeks, this hour is given over to orientation, setting personal goals, and making site visits to employer-partners of Training, Inc. in order to demystify the office workplace. In the weeks to come, volunteers from many of these same companies lead workshops in various topics related to white-collar employment, from interviewing skills, to customer service techniques, to how to dress for success. Finally, once a week, this hour is given over to the main forum for developing participants' self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills: The Human Relations course, taught by counselor Leigh Hewlett.

(The title "counselor" may be misleading in Hewlett's case, according to Willard Pinn. "I don't know if counseling really describes what she does. So much of the counseling that our trainees have received is just listening. They come in and talk about their problems, cry and then leave. Instead, we try to refocus these conversations to the next step: What are you going to do about it? That's the important part.")

Hewlett's course begins in the second week and runs for 10 to 12 sessions. Each of the three groups attends a separate session, and because they already have begun to know each other better and it is led by a counselor they have already spent some time with, the atmosphere is conducive to honest, up-front discussion.

The course is structured around extensive role modeling, interactive exercises during which trainees play through different scenarios in the workplace. "We talk a lot about cultural differences between where participants come from and where they're going to work," says Hewlett, "about how it's not that you have to become a new person. You just have to play the role appropriate to the place."

She sums it up this way: "I try to help them learn not just how to get a job, but how to *keep* a job. So a lot of what we talk about is relationships—with your co-workers and especially your boss. Everything really comes down to learning to know yourself, learning to appreciate your strengths and watching out for your weaknesses."

LONG-TERM *support*

Op-Net

San Francisco, California

The bargain that Op-Net offers its trainees would be hard to resist, even for some successful workers with dreams of a new career: Give us five weeks (plus a two-month internship), and we will turn you into Web designers. The fact that Op-Net consistently delivers on that bargain, even with some of the lowest-income young people in the San Francisco Bay Area, makes the idea all the more remarkable and alluring.

Yet Op-Net managers are the first to point out that the deal is not nearly as simple—or as quick—as it sounds. "Anybody who wants to replicate this program has to understand that the five-week course is only the beginning," says Op-Net cofounder and former executive director Dan Geiger. "Grads are going to experience all sorts of ups and downs, job gaps and a host of other setbacks. For them to succeed, the program has to be there. That can be a two- to three-year commitment." So Op-Net's success depends partly on graduates, staff and students forming lasting relationships that reinforce the brief training and carry the lessons into the first job and even several jobs after that.

Higher Skills, Similar Needs

Op-Net is not, to be sure, a good fit for most of the lowest-skilled young people who take center stage in the other programs this report has profiled. The program is purposefully intense and necessarily targeted only to highly motivated people with high school diplomas or the equivalent and with some proficiency in computers. At a bare minimum, students must demonstrate some familiarity with word processing, Web browsers and e-mail programs.

Yet even if that disqualifies most low-income youth, more than enough disadvantaged applicants meet the criteria to fill four classes of 15 people each per year. All meet the federal definition of low-income, and some preference is given to applicants from San Francisco's poorest neighborhoods. Roughly one-third of participants are African Americans; Latinos and Asians

make up about one-quarter each, and the remainder are white or of other ethnicities. The average age is 21, and the male-female split is 59 to 41 percent—a much higher percentage of young men than in any of the other programs in this report.

One recent recruit was a young man who slept in his car while taking the course. Another found out about the program directly from Op-Net executive director, Joe Hawkins, whose shoes he used to shine each week on Market Street. Both men now have full-time technical jobs.

Though the students entering Op-Net are, on the whole, more capable than those in other programs profiled here, the economic and social leap they are attempting is in some ways much more substantial. Their future colleagues will probably include confident scions of privileged families, some from distinguished secondary schools and colleges here and abroad, many making starting salaries of $50,000 a year and more. As a result, the issues and barriers that Op-Net trainees face are surprisingly similar to those in other programs that try to move more-troubled students into clerical jobs. The students are higher on the skills ladder but just as unprepared for the world they are trying to enter.

Preparing them for the culture shift—developing the soft skills peculiar to the emerging Internet industry—is as important a part of Op-Net's mission as teaching them the mechanics of Hypertext Markup Language, better known as HTML.

The Confusing Code of the Modern Workplace

Even as Op-Net's target job market demands more refined technical skills than the typical entry-level job, the working environment of Silicon Valley requires a much subtler understanding of the social skills needed to be an effective worker. "These companies have a deceptively casual culture," says Valeria Perez-Fereiro, Op-Net's director of program development and community relations. "Employees wear jeans to work, and there might be a ping-pong table in the conference room. But you can't be fooled by that stuff. Everybody works incredibly hard. You've got to understand what's appropriate because you can't afford to be known as 'that guy who's always playing Nerf-ball.'"

Accordingly, Op-Net has only a short list of explicit rules, including the standard prohibitions against sexual harassment, drugs and alcohol and threats of violence. Violation of any of these rules results in immediate expulsion from the program. Students do not punch a time clock, but Op-Net is serious about being on time: Anyone more than 10 minutes late two times or more may be expelled; anyone absent two days without an excuse is terminated.

The program consequently works hard to recreate the industry's subtle balance between demandingly high expectations

and a superficial lack of formal structure. Students are reminded, for example, that even on first encounter, the seeming informality of technical firms can be dangerous. "A lot of companies have applicants go on an all-day interview," says Perez-Fereiro, "so they can get a more thorough impression of them. Over the course of a whole day meeting, [with] friendly people talking about this thing that interests you so much, you can get pretty relaxed. We try to prepare our students to be aware of that—that it's easy to feel *too* comfortable. We had one guy who made a great impression until the end of the day, when he felt relaxed enough to tell an off-color joke. It was basically the end of his interview."

Halfway through the course, Op-Net helps students get acquainted with the high-tech work culture by taking them on a half-day-long field trip to an Internet company. During one such trip, the group visited the Learning Network, which creates online educational applications. Students met the user interface tester and the graphic designer, and in a series of conversations they walked through the stages of a project's life. It is also something like a low-risk dry run for any day-long job interviews in their future.

On one such tour, an Op-Net student wore a T-shirt advertising a friend's software company—clothing he thought would be appropriate for a trip to an office in the same industry. "The only problem was," Perez-Fereiro recalls, "the shirt had a picture on the back of it of a guy smoking a joint. We were tactful with him, saying 'Perhaps this isn't the best place to wear this. You might be applying for a job here in a few weeks.' We could have sent him home to change, or something punitive, but it was enough for him that his peers were embarrassed by it. He was so self-conscious he wore a backpack the entire day."

Students are not required to abide by a dress code, but staff may offer quiet advice if what they wear may be inappropriate at some offices. Just to make sure, one day toward the end of the training, students are told to come in dressed for an interview to show that they have learned how to dress for success.

In short, more than most other training programs, Op-Net must go beyond employee handbooks and dress codes and teach students how to assess for themselves what proper appearance and behavior are in the new culture they are joining. "I tell them to check out the company culture as much as possible," says Perez-Fereiro. "Look at their website, walk by their offices, talk to people who do business with them—find out what the atmosphere is like. As for dress code, ties aren't usually necessary, but [applicants] should be clean-cut. It's best to err on the conservative side."

The Op-Net Challenge

According to the Op-Net staff, of all the jobs in the Internet economy, website design using HTML programming code is a skill both in high demand and relatively easy to learn. Even so, it can be learned

only if students are willing to spend considerable time trying to figure out things on their own, besides keeping up with the rapid pace of instruction. After that, success depends as much on their performance during a two-month internship as during the classroom training it follows. Finally, to help students make it in the extremely competitive high-tech culture of the San Francisco Bay Area, Op-Net provides more extensive placement and ongoing support services than any other program we have described, often for as long as two years after a student has completed coursework.

"Our approach is to do whatever it takes to get our students to succeed," says Dan Geiger, former executive director and now vice president of the Op-Net Board, "but in return, we expect the students to give their best effort." And Op-Net's commitment to its students is not just philosophical: Trainees receive weekly stipends of $200 during training and can get emergency financial assistance for housing, child care, and any other needs during internships and job searches. Op-Net *expects* its students to ask for further help when they decide to switch jobs, are laid off, or even when they are fired.

The financial aid comes bundled with an arsenal of support services to keep students from falling behind because of personal problems, whether they are related to child care, health care or housing or graver threats like domestic violence. These supports continue well into employment. For example, Op-Net recently joined a Bay Area program developed by the nonprofit Juma Ventures that encourages saving and retirement planning by matching every dollar that low-income graduates save with an additional $2 contribution to the student's "Individual Development Account" (IDA). The financial aid and support services generally ensure that students will make it through the course if they can follow the rules and keep up with the course work. Students rarely drop out because of personal troubles.

More than one employee described Op-Net as a "family" in which instructors, graduates and volunteers all come together to support the students as they try to break into this competitive field. Graduates continue to play a large role in the program, tutoring and mentoring of new students, and Op-Net has even gone so far as to let students sleep in its offices when they became homeless.

This level of support comes at a price: Op-Net is highly selective, and most applicants do not make it in the door. There are about 60 to 70 applicants for the 15 slots in each class.

"It all starts with the interview," says Perez-Fereiro, the Op-Net staffer most involved in soft skills teaching. "We have high expectations, and if you're late for your interview, we have to assume you're not ready for the program. We have too many other people eager for a chance to participate."

Joe Hawkins, the current executive director and one of the founders of Op-Net, even compares the program with STRIVE, the nationally known New York City program that trains New York's toughest youth with a combination of inspiration and quasi-military severity: "We focus on discipline, and we try to create a culture of personal responsibility. We're not here for excuses. Either you do it or you don't. If you're late, you're out. Absence means you're not ready."

Applicants who do arrive for their interviews on time must first take a computer skills proficiency test that includes using the Internet, e-mail and word processing, with a section in which students must exhibit some ability to write clearly. Applicants who do not pass the computer test are not interviewed, but they are referred to other local computer training programs. They are welcome to reapply to Op-Net once their skills meet the basic requirements.

The application interview is structured like a job interview, and the program looks for signs that the student is motivated and can work as part of a team. Besides evidence of a diploma or GED, applicants must bring two letters of reference, proof of income, and a sample of any work they have done on the computer or otherwise. About 80 to 90 percent of the applicants are working or recently had jobs before they reach Op-Net, usually in clerical, retail or temporary positions.

A User's Manual for Life

To help prepare the new students for the rigors of the five-week Op-Net course and the internship, program graduates come back to address students on the first day of classes. They present an inspiring picture—exciting-sounding jobs with impressive salaries—but they typically emphasize how much the students have to learn, both technically and socially, and how hard they are going to have to work.

Students are told that their success depends most on whether they are willing to commit to changing not only the way they work but also the way they *live*. The point-blank message is that this may involve giving up old friends and keeping unsupportive family members at bay. Board President David Ellington, who founded Op-Net along with Dan Geiger and Joe Hawkins, gives the students what one staff member describes as a "scared straight" speech. "He tells them 'we're not going to let you screw this up.' Sometimes I think that maybe it's too strong, but it does reach the tougher students. They really respond to his example and what he has to say."

At the end of the program's first day, Op-Net students have a "download session" where they discuss office culture and develop "rules of respect" for the five weeks they will spend together. This facilitated discussion helps them to get acquainted and share their values at the same time that they reflect on what they have heard from staff on the first day. Facilitators also use the process of laying

out the program rules as an introduction to the basic concepts of project management as it is understood in the Internet industry.

Because Op-Net trainees have already been screened for many "hard" skills, there is less emphasis on basic training in computers, typing, math and English than in other workforce development programs. The kind of rote-and-repetition learning that other programs expend on those skills are, in Op-Net's world, devoted to mastering basic HTML coding procedures. Otherwise, the focus is on preparing for the new culture that students are going to enter. That preparation is handled with as much rigor as is HTML. There is even a "user's manual" for soft skills.

Fridays at Op-Net are reserved for presentations and workshops focused primarily on soft skills development. During the first hour of the morning, students are drilled on the business vocabulary and industry jargon they were given the night before. Sometimes the tests require students to write sentences using the words; other times they are oral: "How would you use 'intranet' in a job interview?" Next come presentations by industry representatives on such topics as preparing for interviews, conducting job searches, project management and working in a team. Woven into these and staff presentations are lots of discussion about "how to be the person you're trying to be," as Perez-Fereiro puts it: "Things like who do you include in your life? How are old friends and patterns of behavior going to fit in with your future development?"

Students make presentations to the rest of the class on assigned readings throughout the course, and in the fourth and fifth week, Fridays can also be a time to conduct and review mock interviews. Sometimes there are tests on assigned readings, almost all of which come from Op-Net's encyclopedic soft skills manual, an enormous tome of readings related to the demands and culture of high-tech employment. The soft-skills manual presents articles on various jobs in the Internet industry, the core skills needed for those jobs, developing "emotional intelligence," holding onto jobs, and an extensive how-to section on job searching specific to the industry.

Most of the readings in the soft skills manual are adapted or pulled directly from articles in *Fast Company, SkillsNet, Webmonkey.com,* and other industry publications, and are aimed at the well-educated technology worker, not the typical training-program student. While these readings and presentations constitute the only official "homework" of the course, the students are usually working after hours on the intense in-class workload.

"Learning How to Learn"

After the orientation on the first day, Op-Net students spend their first week on a crash course in HTML, the computer language that controls the appearance and functioning of most Internet websites.

There is an HTML test twice a week and the testing continues throughout the five weeks, expanding to other technical skills, industry vocabulary and other essential information besides HTML. Days are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., although students are also expected to take advantage of volunteers and program graduates who offer tutoring Wednesdays and Thursdays from 5 to 8 p.m.

Yet for all the rigor of this exercise, the program does not attempt to teach total mastery in five weeks. Instead, it provides a foundation of classroom instruction and project-based applied learning and then insists that students spend further time and effort learning and mastering skills on their own. The point is not just to get them to master a huge amount of information in a short time; it is also to get them in the habit of constant self-directed learning.

In short, besides the soft skills of effective social interaction and personal discipline, Op-Net tries to inculcate habits of curiosity, experimentation and discovery. Says Geiger, "Everything changes so quickly in this industry that it's all about learning *how to learn*. Even if you've mastered one design program, you've got to keep up with constant changes and improvements that are being made to it. Even then, it might become obsolete, and you'll have to learn a whole new program."

Setting an example for this kind of mental discipline is part of the job that graduates take on when they volunteer as tutors on Wednesday and Thursday nights. "If they're having difficulty learning the language," explains Perez-Fereiro, "especially among the women, they start beating themselves up about it. Having recent grads tutoring them helps in two ways: They get extra help to learn the code, but they also get support from someone who has been in the same position, who got through it successfully. And if it's someone from the industry tutoring them, it gives them a chance to see what people there are like. It shows them how to ask questions and demystifies the culture for them."

The intellectual rewards for all this effort come quickly. Before the first week is out, students see what they have learned take shape on their computer screens, in the form of a webpage they have designed for themselves in HTML. In the second week, they move on to Adobe PhotoShop, an industry-standard graphics program; a week later, they begin learning the more complex web design language of Java Script.

But even as this rapid-fire software training is under way, the trainees are headed straight into a total-immersion exercise. In their second week of training, while they are still struggling with the rudiments of HTML, the Op-Net neophytes begin developing a website for a corporate customer. It is not a simulation. The customer is real, and the result needs to be a site that the company will actually use.

Crunch Time

The staff begins by dividing the class into two teams. A designated leader from each team reports to one student who is the overall project manager; other students are assigned project roles according to their interests and abilities. The most likely candidates do not always get the leader-ship positions. "We try to make sure that there's at least one woman in a leadership position, in order to bring out any gender issues anyone might have," says Perez-Fereiro.

The newly formed teams then meet with a business or nonprofit organization that needs a website. For the client organization it is a bit of a risk, but the service comes with website hosting thereafter, and all of it is free of charge. On those terms, there have been no problems attracting clients for every training session. Recent clients have included a mediation and counseling service, a maker of gourmet sauces and a former Black Panther who gives historical tours of Oakland.

After the client explains his or her needs and ideas for the website, the teams spend the next couple of days developing design mock-ups, using (and learning) PhotoShop in the process. The students present the mock-up and their design ideas to the client in a second meeting. Then, with the client's suggestions and eventual approval, they begin to create the actual site in HTML code, dividing programming duties among the two teams. A few days later, the teams meet with the client again to present the "first iteration." If the PhotoShop mock-up could be compared to a written report's outline, the first iteration is the first full draft. The client gives more feedback, and the teams go back to continue developing the product.

At this point in the process, all of the soft skills issues that have been discussed in Op-Net classes start to come out. "Ideally, the project is the most important activity of the entire course," says Geiger. "It's when everything comes to the surface. We'll be talking about anger, or conflict resolution, but when it actually *happens* during the life of the project—when one team will do quite well and have all their ideas adopted and the other can't even sit in a room together—the students really get it. They see how it's a lack of soft skills that will keep you from working in this industry."

Says Perez-Fereiro, "In some classes, we've had a presentation on the language of criticism, but it can't compare to what happens in the project, especially after the first iteration." While clients understand the purpose of the exercise and are generally supportive, they also want websites that fit their needs. So invariably a lot of students' suggestions and ideas get shot down, even when they have taken hours of work to make them operable. "If there are hurt feelings, then they learn that's how this work is. You've got to learn how not to let your ego get invested in your ideas. You just move on and get the project done."

At this stage, the process becomes more Darwinian than might be the case in a simulation. The two teams are merged, and because the project is real and must be completed, the project manager must assign duties to those most likely to get the job done. The students who are left off the second team begin to work on their own websites or update and maintain existing sites hosted by Op-Net. Usually the client has a completely operable website up and running by the fourth, or sometimes the fifth, week of the course.

By that final week, most of the students are working on their own websites, which, in the world of Internet employment, act as electronic resumes and work samples all in one. By this stage, the pressure can be particularly intense: Students are trying to digest all they have been taught in the past four weeks while trying to finish projects and assignments. The $200 per week stipend will soon end, and the uncertainty surrounding internship placements makes the personal website seem like the most important thing in the students' nascent careers.

"The number-one issue for many of our students is a fear of failure—or maybe it's a fear of success," says Perez-Ferreiro. "Every session, a number of students won't finish their websites, I think because they're afraid to put out something that's so personal."

Meanwhile, also in this final week, Joe Hawkins leads a class in writing resumes, and students will eventually produce at least three drafts before they are ready for distribution. The students continue to practice mock interviews, using the new technology in the process: To be scheduled for a mock interview, students must first write an e-mail requesting an appointment and document their job experience not on paper but with an e-resume. (The soft skills manual has an extensive section on resume writing geared specifically toward creating electronic resumes.)

In the background, staff members are meeting to appraise each student's strengths and weaknesses, both "soft" and "hard," and then to match them with internship opportunities.

The Long Follow-up

Op-Net's reputation has given it an edge in finding internship opportunities for those who finish the five weeks of training. At the interns' going rate of approximately $12 an hour, Op-Net can usually arrange an internship opportunity for every graduate, and the internship can often (although not always) lead to a permanent job at the same firm.

"We used to subsidize the internships," says Geiger, "but then we realized how valuable the interns were to the employers. With the skills they have, they're a bargain." While every student eventually gets an internship, it can take a while: Varying levels of technical expertise and language, math and soft skills among the students can draw out the placement process for as many as four weeks after the course is completed.

Meanwhile, the $200 monthly stipend ends with the completion of the course, and most students can experience a gap of two to four weeks before they are placed into their internships. While this accurately reflects the volatility of dot-com employment, it is a prime opportunity for students to fall through the cracks. So the program is ready with emergency cash grants during this period, which in some cycles become more the rule than the exception.

Given the short training period, the internship is an indispensable part of preparing students for the world of work. And it is the next stage of the long, supportive relationship that graduates form with staff and alumni. Contacts between staff and interns by phone and e-mail are steady throughout the internship. In particular, job developer and coach La Shawn Wells shifts into case-management mode, making sure that students are continuing their timely progress toward a permanent job, checking with the intern's employer to see how the relationship is working (and encouraging employers to hire the interns permanently), informing the student about other job openings, and making sure that the student is thinking ahead and independently searching for a job.

Even when Op-Net finds job openings for students to pursue, the onus is always on the student to make the connection on his or her own. The volatility of the industry makes it imperative that Op-Net's graduates keep up to date on their job opportunities, have the tools to recover quickly from termination or other job disruptions, and be able to find another position when necessary.

"The nature of the industry creates employment gaps," says Wells, the person most responsible for helping students bridge this divide. "They're going to experience knockdowns, layoffs, companies closing, and they're going to have to be able to get up right away, update their resumes and start over." Graduates regularly return for help polishing their resumes, developing new leads or improving their technical skills. In the Op-Net "family," graduates are always welcome back, whether to serve as mentors and tutors to current students or to get help getting back on their feet after a setback.

More routinely, graduates are invited back every two months for Op-Net's Alumni Support Group, which attracts as many as 60 graduates at a time. These meetings can be informal and unstructured, but usually offer a presentation about subjects useful to people with a new (and in some cases, their first) income stream—topics like how to manage credit cards, where to get investment advice or how stock options work (a potentially life-altering matter in the more successful dot-coms). During and after the basic Op-Net course, there are seminars on budgeting, investing, home ownership versus renting, and other issues of personal finance. These are not synchronized with the course, but students are expected to

attend them at one point or another. And the themes carry on into alumni nights and other follow-up support.

All this advice is timely and in some cases urgently needed. But the main reason graduates go to the support groups is for peer support. It is a great place to network, hear about new job opportunities and learn what other companies are like. "They come because they have a connection with the program," says Jody Mahoney, director of training and consulting services. "It's a very strong bond. I mean, 87 percent of the people in this industry are white men! I've got one graduate who is one of just three employees of color in a 200-person company. So it's great to have the support of your peers."

"A lot of times," she continues, "our graduates are welcomed at companies, but they're promoted in public as a kind of poster child for a diversity that doesn't always exist in the company. Or their coworkers want to broaden their horizons—gentrify them, so to speak. Or, in a worse case, they work for a 22-year-old computer geek with no management skills who is telling them you have to work 60 hours this week or you're fired." These kinds of cultural clashes cry out for the kind of support that come best from a graduate's peers, who are struggling with the same challenges or have found ways to master them.

Even with all this support, some alumni do not make it. One recent graduate was doing phenomenally well at her new $50,000-a-year position at a software firm, but her success quickly attracted the attention of old friends and family. Soon she let the (abusive) father of her children move back in with her. Next came homeless cousins. Before long the abuse resumed, even as she was now trying to support a large, extended family. Tragically, she was too ashamed to ask Op-Net or her employer for help or advice. It did not take long for her absences and the declining quality of her work to lead to termination.

"You can be a mirror to them and give them advice," says Perez-Fereiro, "but at that level of problems we need to refer them to professional counseling. But you can't make them go—that's always going to be up to the individual." For many of Op-Net's less-advantaged students, the gravitational pull of an earlier life—of disintegrated communities and troubled families, and of personal habits formed in a world of few opportunities—remains strong for years. To counter that downward pull, the program tries to maintain a constant, countervailing pressure, through continued programs and services and support of faculty and sympathetic employers and, most of all, with peer support from a growing alumni network.

Roughly one-third of the way through the hundreds of pages in Op-Net's "Soft Skills/Job Readiness" manual is a reprint of psychologist Daniel Goleman's *Harvard Business Review* article on "emotional intelligence," titled, "What Makes a Leader."

It includes this exhortation, which could just as well be a rallying cry for the whole Op-Net "family":

To enhance emotional intelligence, organizations must…help people break old behavioral habits and establish new ones. That not only takes much more time than conventional training programs, it also requires an individualized approach…With persistence and practice, such a process can lead to lasting results.

The "CULTURE *of* WORK"

Lessons and Principles

The four programs profiled in this report obviously take different approaches to different kinds of students, and some would no doubt disagree with others over the fine points of training philosophy. Still, they offer several general lessons for anyone who sets out to help trainees adapt to the culture of work as well as learn technical skills. Among the insights these programs illustrate, here are six real-world lessons that most practitioners can readily adapt to whatever population they serve, alongside whatever mix of hard skills training they provide:

1. ***Integrate soft skills training into every element of the curriculum.***

The most successful training programs generally resist the temptation to treat soft skills as simply another discipline to be taught—and thus to relegate it to an hour of the day, a special exercise or a one-week module. These separate treatments are often useful, even necessary, but they are not enough. Social and behavioral traits tend to be inculcated mainly through repetition and practice, not through explanation. In all the programs we have profiled, the whole curriculum is carefully organized around multiple opportunities to practice social interactions that are likely to arise on the job: interviewing techniques, responding to criticism or pressure, negotiating with team members or supervisors, and so on.

Each of these exercises seeks to form some habit of personal discipline or behavior that students can use later. Once the principle is established in a discussion or class exercise, it is practiced over and over throughout the training cycle. Most often, the exercises are fairly low risk (the worst that can happen is usually criticism, not dismissal). But the challenge is to present them as matters of very high stakes once the real job begins—thus making them worthy of the constant, sometimes tiresome, repetition.

At ACHIEVE and OBT, for example, social and cultural training do not wait for a designated course like OBT's "World of Work." It starts with the intake interviews and never stops. A classroom exercise on

typing or office procedures is invariably bound up with discussions about the virtues of precision and neatness, strategies for preparing a memo or handling a negotiation, or simply awareness of what is going on in the wider world. OBT's classroom discussion about the Yankees and the presidential election not only taught trainees to be aware of what is happening around them, it also had the subtler effect of focusing them on topics of conversation that are acceptable in the workplace—an area where many otherwise successful new employees can get into trouble.

Op-Net's approach to integrating soft and hard skills is more literal: Almost the entire course is dedicated to *satisfying a customer* while mastering technical skills. There is no room for either technical or social error in this mix. From early in the course, all the essential soft skills—working efficiently with your colleagues to make the customer happy—are in play right along with good programming and design. And the consequences are real.

The most important reason for integrating soft and hard skills is not just the efficient use of time, although that is one factor. The main reason is that the workplace recognizes no such distinction: Employees on a project team need to deal with each other both expertly and respectfully, all in the same interaction. Office staff need to be orderly and punctual and technically competent all at once. When viewed from the perspective of the workplace, this point seems glaringly obvious. Yet in planning a curriculum, many programs seem to place soft skills alongside typing, math and software as a separate "class" that gets a time allocation all its own. That approach is not only less realistic, it is less likely to be effective.

2. *Create work or work-like tasks and establish teams to complete them.*

The tasks can be real work for real customers, as at Op-Net, or full-scale simulations, as at Training, Inc. But they might also take the hybrid approach of ACHIEVE, where day-to-day training exercises are presented as if they were office assignments and must be pursued with the workplace methods of teamwork, scheduling and periodic discussions with the "boss."

The first thing that all these approaches have in common is that they replace the teacher-student relationship of a traditional classroom with the boss-employee or consultant-client relationship of the business world. They get students used to thinking about their work as a useful *product*, not merely an exercise. At Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, for example—the one program in this report that does not conduct a formal work simulation—students practice organization and typing and self-presentation in the creation of a Personal Data Sheet (which later becomes a resume) during a "World of Work" class. They also make public speaking presentations on topics they will eventually have to be conversant in for the work world. All of these are organized as work assignments, not classroom drills. The objective is to

produce something actually *useful,* something that prospective employers will read or that trainees can use when interviewing for jobs. And significantly, many of these exercises are conducted in teams.

That is the second aspect of this general principle that all four programs teach: teamwork. The most important difference between work and school is that in school the quality of your work affects only you—bad work will get you an F, maybe, but that is the end of it. In the work world, your mistakes affect *other people* as well, and someone else's mistake will affect you. Learning the dynamics of mutual reliance and learning to adjust your habits to the needs and abilities of other people are indispensable to eventual success. But these skills are something few schools can teach effectively. For this kind of learning, description and analysis are almost useless by themselves. Practice is everything—the more realistic, the better.

At Training, Inc., for example, the Lester Hill simulation creates not only a complex "company" with multiple departments relying on one another for success, but it also holds employees to a single bottom line by which all of them stand or fall. It then takes the mutual dependence a step further by creating a *second* company, the Tallidata "supplier" firm, that is completely independent of the Lester Hill crew and yet must make Lester Hill happy if it hopes to meet its own bottom line. The layers of mutual reliance are challenging to explain, but then again, explaining them is not terribly useful. *Experiencing* them has the swift and bracing effect of a cold shower, something no three-week lecture course could ever duplicate.

3. *Put trainees in the employer's role from time to time, so that by managing they can learn to be managed.*

Another advantage of the role playing and simulation in these programs is that they place students in the position of team members, managers or customers who must react to the quality of work they get from others. This change of perspective helps to take some of the mystery and seeming arbitrariness out of the culture of work. Meeting deadlines, being courteous, speaking and writing clearly, and staying calm are important not just because someone says you must but also because important things cannot be done without those disciplines. How do we know? Because we saw a project collapse when someone did not meet the challenge.

To explain why completing tasks is necessary and inescapable, there is no more effective tactic than letting students experience the needs and pressures of those who give directions. All these programs at some point create teams of trainees with their own internal leadership structures in which some students inevitably exercise authority over others. In the more literal work simulations at Training, Inc. and Op-Net, the programs actually designate trainee-managers of various levels who exercise authority and are held accountable for subordinates' achievements. But simulations are not the

only opportunities for giving trainees a glimpse of the manager's needs and responsibilities, while also preparing them for manager positions themselves.

Recall the classroom negotiations at ACHIEVE over dress codes or the one over how to complete a lagging assignment on time. In both cases, the class suddenly found itself jolted out of the familiar role of people being judged. Without warning, they were suddenly compelled to see the world through the eyes of those who do the judging. When Maia Chisholm stepped to the back of the class in her weird outfit and asked them to describe it, she put students in the judgment seat and led them in a discussion about why they had judged her clothing improper. When she sent them out to caucus over how they would complete an assignment on time, she put them in charge of getting work done and of establishing deadlines for one another. Neither of these cases involved any of the complexities of a simulation. They simply tweaked the trainees' *point of view* and provided a window into the world of supervisory responsibilities.

4. *Establish the discipline of the workplace in all aspects of the program.*

This is where "soft" skills lose most of their "softness"—and the work becomes both hard and at times stressful. One essential social skill is coping with the reality that employees cannot behave and speak as they please, even if they are getting their work done. There will be rules they do not like, enforced by people they may also not like, and applied in ways with which they will disagree. The sooner that hard reality is established, practiced and re-practiced, the better.

The most obvious areas for this kind of immediate and consistent discipline are attendance, punctuality and clothing. Nearly all successful workforce programs establish unwavering dress codes (even when, in ACHIEVE's case, the students write the code themselves). All of them demand regular attendance. And all enforce punctuality. Two of the four programs we profiled expect students to punch a time clock on arriving and leaving. Op-Net, however, serves an industry where time clocks are alien. Yet Op-Net may be the most exacting of all these programs on the subject of punctuality. Participants can be dismissed for three instances of tardiness, a fact of which they are bluntly warned before the course begins. And tardiness is measured by the minute.

At the opposite end of the bluntness spectrum is Training, Inc., whose staff deliberately takes a more collegial approach to enforcing rules. Yet enforce they must, and even in the gentle language of the program's guide-and-support philosophy, the room for dissent is pointedly narrow. "When someone comes to the program in jeans," says a staff member, "we talk to them the first time, but the second time we might have to send them home." That is about as much lenience as one would expect from an employer.

But an atmosphere of discipline goes beyond the basic rules of timeliness and attire. At OBT, for example, every classroom discussion is a ceaseless exercise in respectful forms of address, good posture, correct grammar, polite assertiveness and (most of all) handling criticism. Every spoken sentence is subject to correction. Even during our interview with a student for this report, OBT managers would not let a grammatical error slip by.

If this approach seems a little obsessive, that may well be the point. Even the most extensive workforce program occupies a fleeting moment in the lives of its trainees. The only hope of making a lasting difference in their behavior and attitudes lies in constant practice, correction, enforcement, reinforcement, and more practice.

5. *Recreate the physical environment of work to the fullest extent possible.*

For trainees from the most disadvantaged families and communities, just the sight of an office building, its cubicles and machines and low-decibel conversations, can seem alien and threatening. Even the tiny, improvised Model Office at ACHIEVE—where the community college's classrooms provide little chance to recreate the complete atmosphere of an office—gave participants some firsthand experience of the office milieu. "I had never sat at a desk before," a trainee told us. After spending time in ACHIEVE's cramped office cubicles, a graduate found the more-spacious desk at her first job actually inviting.

Yet ACHIEVE staff would be the first to point out that a more complete re-creation of the office environment would be even better. Training, Inc. probably defines the high end of authenticity in its training space, which is all but indistinguishable from an office. The re-creation extends even beyond its walls: Training, Inc. has set itself up amid the imposing glass towers of downtown Boston, an area where many poor young people had never passed.

Simulating the work environment can take different forms. The warehouse minimalism of Op-Net's space, for example, was easy enough to create, but it exactly mirrors the conditions of its upstart industry. The key is not just breaking down trainees' fears of the working environment but also teaching them how to *behave* in that environment. The message, in other words, is not merely "feel welcome here" but also "learn what's acceptable here." In the model offices of ACHIEVE, a racy pin-up or a sloppy desk would elicit a fast correction.

6. *Give participants lots of opportunities to get to know successful people.*

Trainees tend to draw lasting encouragement and positive examples from people who are doing well in the business world and will spend enough time to help them overcome barriers of intimidation or alienation. These interactions need not be intimate nurturing and mentoring relationships (which are great, but hard to engineer consistently). They can simply be frank, open conversations with business-people who volunteer to drop in from time to time or with any working people—especially some who were once unemployed or unskilled like the trainees. People close to the participants' age and social background can be particularly helpful, but any emissary from the seemingly foreign world of the workplace can help bridge the sense of distrust or dread that many trainees feel at first.

Training, Inc. maintains an extensive roster of friendly business contacts who conduct seminars or give talks in the program, role play as customers of the pseudo-company Lester Hill, and ultimately, in many cases, actually hire some of the program's graduates. Op-Net and ACHIEVE welcome graduates back as encouraging examples to new participants. And Op-Net provides what may be the ultimate exercise in relationship building: The participants do real work for actual business clients.

These business contacts do not usually become close and personal; that is not their purpose. Most of the time they are just a few friendly faces in the work world and a source of frank answers to participants' basic questions. For closer and more lasting role models, trainees often turn to program staff—who are after all successful working people who know each participant fairly well. But that can quickly become a challenge for trainers with limited free time and hundreds of graduates a year. It is not, in short, a situation that can be encouraged for every student or even for most students. But it is a powerful factor when it works.

7. *Support services and soft skills are not the same, but they go hand in hand.*

There are obviously few ways to teach punctuality to a young mother with no child care, or to engender self-respect in someone locked in an abusive relationship. Each of the programs profiled here maintains some network of supportive services, counseling, child care, health and other resources that people will need if they are to get a job and keep it. It's essential, of course, that students develop the soft skills necessary to use these services effectively, and to know when to call on them before problems become acute. But it can be unrealistic to expect students in dire circumstances—economic, social or even just logistical—to be able to sort through their problems armed with "skills" alone.

In concept, these principles are neither esoteric nor subtle. On paper, several of them may seem merely self-evident. Yet weaving them into the day-to-day practice of a real workforce program, with its

crushing time constraints and myriad logistical problems, requires careful planning and constant revision and experimentation. That is why this report is devoted more to profiles of working programs than to a catalog of theoretical arguments.

In any case, the fundamental theoretical premise is also the fundamental practical challenge: Students who develop hard skills alone may end up being just as hard to employ as those who learn no skills at all. Developing both social and technical abilities—not side by side, but in the same routine, with the same degree of emphasis and real-world concreteness—is the surest way to equip trainees for the demands of the workplace, both soft and hard.

Contact Information

Op-Net

Joe Hawkins, *Executive Director*
965 Mission Street, Suite 705
San Francisco, CA 94103
tel: 415-882-1555

ACHIEVE

Maia Chisholm, *Director*
Cabrillo Community College
Watsonville Center
318 Union Street
Watsonville, CA 95076-4612
tel: 831-477-5120

Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow

Sister Mary Franciscus, *Executive Director*
783 Fourth Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11232
tel: 718-369-0303

Training, Inc.

Willard Pinn, *Director*
YMCA of Greater Boston
294 Washington Street, Suite 340
Boston, MA 02115
tel: 617-542-1800

P/PV

Public/Private Ventures

The Chanin Building
122 East 42nd Street, 41st Floor
New York, NY 10168

Tel: (212) 822-2400
Fax: (212) 949-0439

For additional copies of reports or for more information:

2000 Market Street, Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Tel: (215) 557-4400
Fax: (215) 557-4469
Url: http://www.ppv.org

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